Oral Communication Assessment in a General Education Professional Communication Course: Politics and a Proposal

Kristin Pickering
Tennessee Tech University

Abstract. This article discusses ways that an oral communication course, Professional Communication, was assessed not only to meet the requirements of the university's outside governing board but also to increase instructional effectiveness within the course while collaborating with faculty who teach it. As a result of the course faculty's taking ownership of the assessment process, despite difficult politics, the faculty created a new assessment form genre, which allows them to begin assessing required characteristics for the governing board, as well as characteristics identified by the faculty as essential for students to master as they learn specific oral communication genres within the course. The article focuses on assessment processes and politics while also proposing a framework for assessment that goes beyond meeting requirements to expanding the process by meeting specific student and faculty needs.

Keywords. Programmatic reflection, assessment, oral communication, genres

Proving our effectiveness in a variety of ways has become a necessity in today's educational culture of downsizing faculty while expanding class sizes, growing budget restrictions, and shrinking funding sources (whether state/federally supported or private). Assessment efforts can strengthen our arguments for our teaching and research strategies, whether governed from on high (such as accreditation boards) or from within (such as self studies for academic audits). Recently, and not surprisingly, general education courses have also become the focus of assessment, at the direction of state education governing boards. The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) is one such governing board, and Tennessee Tech University (TTU), one of the state's institutions, recently began participating in statewide, mandated assessment of its general education courses.

Programmatic Perspectives, 5(1), Spring 2013: 34-58. Contact author: KPickering@tntech.edu.
In 2001, the TBR changed the general education course requirements for all universities in its system in an effort to move all curricula to 120 credit hours. Tennessee has a low percentage of residents with bachelor’s degrees, and lowering the number of credit hours needed for a degree (the Professional Communication curriculum went from 132 to 120) would help ensure that students could more feasibly obtain a bachelor’s degree in four years, thus enhancing marketing efforts and attracting more students to state universities. According to the 2012 Higher Education Profiles and Trends, published by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (2012), as of 2010, only 14.7% of Tennessee’s residents had a bachelor’s degree (p. 2). This low statistic is significant because the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce’s (2012) analysis of occupation data and workforce trends predicts that “54 percent of Tennessee’s jobs will require postsecondary education by 2018” (p. 2). These statistics have increased the state’s motivation to encourage its residents to obtain college degrees in general, including bachelor’s degrees.

As part of the reduction in credit hours, the TBR redefined a category that had a direct effect on our Department of English and Communications at TTU: a nine-credit-hour “Communication” requirement that included the two-semester freshman English sequence and then SPCH 2410, Introduction to Speech Communication. TTU anticipated that one course meeting this requirement would not be enough for all students at the university to take, so upper-level administration assigned several interdisciplinary faculty to a general education communication committee, charged with exploring options for other courses to help meet this requirement. A department chair within the College of Engineering chaired the committee, and a professor of Speech and I were also on the committee.

At the time, the Professional Communication curricula included PC 2500, which served as an introduction to majors. Because this course contained oral presentations, the committee decided that this course would be a good one to explore for the oral communication, general education requirement, especially because the course addressed disciplinary content that would be especially helpful to engineering and business disciplines, and then the disciplinary content related more to Professional Communication could be moved to an already-existing 3000-level course. While the content for this general education course could not be designed specifically for a particular discipline, if the course framework were general enough, students could bring their disciplinary knowledge to the course and could
be more practically prepared to give presentations in their respective disciplines. The course was to include six oral presentations, along with instruction in team presentations and presentation technologies. The course included writing to a minor degree with such assignments as audience analyses, evaluations, and visual aids/handouts.

Everyone on the committee seemed to support this idea of the redesigned PC 2500. This interdisciplinary committee, then, helped recommend a course within the Department of English and Communications that would help meet the needs of students in fields the university wanted especially to support and grow, including engineering and business. The Professional Communication faculty welcomed the use of this course as part of the general education requirements because they wanted to enhance the major and saw this course as an opportunity for growth; plus, they felt that students could benefit from the technical/professional communication strategies the course would promote. However, over time, the Speech faculty grew to resent this change and would challenge it. Even though both courses satisfy the same general education requirement, no collaboration took place as PC 2500 was being redesigned or later as faculty began teaching the course.

In 2002, PC 2500 (Communicating in the Professions) gained approval as a general education, oral communication course at TTU. In redesigning this course (which incorporates Laura Gurak’s Oral Presentations for Technical Communication) as a general education course, our Professional Communication faculty accomplished the progressive goal of “mak[ing] technical communication studies more central to . . . institutions and more influential with more students” (Rehling & Lindeman, 2010, p. 4). The Professional Communication Program at TTU focuses on scientific and technical writing, as well as effective oral communication and communicating using various electronic media effectively. The integrative process of adding this course to the general education curriculum has assisted in highlighting technical communication’s focus within our university’s (and our College of Arts and Sciences’) commitment to technology as well as effective communication within the liberal arts. As students consider their general education course options, they can still take SPCH 2410 to complete the requirement, rather than PC 2500. Immediately after PC 2500 became a general education course, though, enrollment in the course understandably grew to an unmanageable level. Although the addition of this course did not impact the content of SPCH 2410 at all, PC 2500 included more team and work-themed presentations, and students soon perceived the course content as more relevant. Quickly, enrollment and
demand increased so much that often, only graduating seniors or students allowed to register early (such as honors students, athletes, or students with disabilities) populate the course sections, and the sections are full after the first couple of days of registration each semester. The Department of English and Communications does not have the faculty (full time or adjunct) to meet the demand for the course.

When the Speech faculty saw the high demand for a different course related to oral communication, they began to resent PC 2500’s redesign and challenged the qualifications of the faculty teaching the course in addition to its content, even though PC 2500 faculty had backgrounds in English, Composition, or Professional Communication and even though the course had to meet the same outcomes goals as SPCH 2410; the Speech faculty maintained that PC 2500 was still a writing course on the one hand, but on the other hand, they tried to take ownership of the course, since it was now a “Speech” course. However, both courses have remained separate and are taught by faculty in the respective areas (Professional Communication faculty do not teach SPCH 2410, and Speech faculty do not teach PC 2500, although at first, some faculty did teach both). Unfortunately, tension developed between the two fields, and, as a result of other departmental difficulties, Speech and Journalism formed a separate departmental division from the other fields in the department, and a proposal has been submitted to TBR for Speech and Journalism to form a separate department of Communication. At this time, both SPCH 2410 and PC 2500 undergo assessment each fall as part of the TBR general education assessment process, and then recommendations are made by the faculty teaching the courses in order to improve achieving outcomes goals presented by TBR. Formal assessment began in the fall of 2010.

Because PC 2500 was a new general education course, assessment became a legitimating factor, especially because SPCH 2410 was an already established course and was and has since been considered the more “mainstream” and legitimate general education, oral communication course at TTU. In the edited collection Assessment in Technical and Professional Communication, Margaret Hundleby and Jo Allen (2010) state in their foreword that “assessment in our field has suffered both from irregular attention to its status in our overall practice and from uncertainty about productive and authentic strategies” (p. vii). Especially because PC 2500 is a relatively new course and has somewhat of a relationship to an already existing one, I believe establishing an effective assessment process and pattern for this course is essential to helping legitimize Professional Communication as a field at TTU. In addition, Hundleby and Allen call for those
of us in the fields of Technical Communication and Professional Communication to “begin the process of shifting the status of our assessment practices to a level commensurate with the effort we are putting into building the status of the field” (p. viii). The assessment efforts discussed here aim at accomplishing such a goal.

During the process of coordinating the assessment process, many issues rose to the surface that undoubtedly impact institutions not only with general education business/professional communication oral communication courses but also those with oral communication courses within the field in general or even courses that require oral communication as a significant component. In order to help highlight some of these issues and debates, I would like here to accomplish several things: 1) provide a brief review of some of the relevant literature focusing on assessment, 2) relate that review to the mandated outcomes goals that many of us address in our institutions, 3) discuss ways those goals define the genres we teach, although we can subvert that definition to some degree, 4) provide strategies for difficult political assessment contexts, and 5) propose an example of ways to maximize the use of outcomes based assessment for our benefit. While some of the discussion here is specific to TTU, much of the conversation is applicable to broader institutional contexts.

**Literature Review**

In their essay “Students’ Perceived Preference for Visual and Auditory Assessment with E-Handwritten Feedback,” Crews and Wilkinson (2010) state, “meaningful assessment is essential” (2010, p. 400) in order to help students learn. Interestingly, the assessment method described here originally was developed to ensure that general education outcomes goals were being included and evaluated in oral communication courses; the assumption, therefore, is that if these outcomes goals are being included successfully, students will be learning (and the learning would be meaningful, as well). As Allen (2010) cautions, though, “most assessment experts caution against one-size-fits-all assessment” (p. 39). Creating an assessment tool that met the TBR needs as well as TTU’s students’ needs was somewhat difficult and required the development of a new genre (the assessment tool itself) that incorporated the TBR purposes as well as the communication instructors’ purposes at TTU. Developing this type of assessment tool was important in reflecting a context for our assessment (Huot, 1996; Yu, 2010), as well as the need to implement an assessment tool that interfaced effectively with “an institution’s learning goals” (Fraser, Harich, Norby, Brzovic, Rizkallah, & Loewy, 2005, p. 291); our students, many from business, nurs-
ing, and engineering disciplines, bring different knowledge to the assignments instructors pose to students in the class. While our instructors may not always understand the specifics of different technical disciplines that our students draw upon for their presentations’ subject matter, the assessment tool allows for evaluation of general, generic qualities essential for successful presentations. Yet this assessment tool is an evolving one and continues to change based on changing student populations (the number of students in our classes from certain majors, for example) and even workplace expectations; many workplaces today require “presentations” rather than “speeches given from a podium” (Fisk, 2007).

Ideally, the assessment tool would be used as a teaching tool, such as Pathak (2001) demonstrated with the incorporation of peer feedback into an oral presentation module. Schullery and Gibson (2001) also discuss the benefit of assessing group communication skills, including weaknesses, and ways to use the results for improvement. While the teachable benefits of the TBR assessment in themselves do not seem very tangible, the individual instructors have access to their course assessment results (as presented via an Excel spreadsheet) overall, and they also are the ones filling out the assessment forms, so they can get a sense of what areas might be emphasized more for the current students as well as perhaps future ones.

The TBR outcomes goals as presented to the Professional Communication faculty originally did not seem directly related to teaching benefits, though. In fact, it did not seem clear to anyone how the assessment results would be used, and after three years of assessment reports, the TBR has not responded to any of them. Because the assessment process is time consuming, I wondered if there might be a way to accomplish the assessment process and include areas our faculty wanted to assess, as well, areas that we had learned from experience were important that our students learn but that the students were having difficulty learning. Below is a discussion of the mandated TBR outcomes goals for the oral communication requirement, as well as a discussion of how a particular tool, the oral presentation evaluation form, evolved during the assessment process. This tool enabled Professional Communication instructors to complete the mandated assessment while also learning more about students’ progress regarding other generic characteristics of effective presentations

**Outcomes Goals**

As part of the mandated TBR assessment process, oral communication instructors must assess certain outcomes goals, listed below.
Table 1: Outcomes Goals for Oral Communication for Institutions in the TBR System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Students are able to distill a primary purpose into a single, compelling statement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Students are able to order major points in a reasonable and convincing manner based on that purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Students are able to develop their ideas using appropriate rhetorical patterns (e.g., narration, example, comparison/contrast, classification, cause/effect, definition).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Students are able to employ correct diction, syntax, usage, grammar, and mechanics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Students are able to manage and coordinate basic information gathered from multiple sources.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the Professional Communication instructors were presented with these goals, they were disturbed mostly by items C and D. Instructors were concerned that item C reflected a focus on modes that had become outdated in the teaching of Composition (all of the Professional Communication instructors have taught Composition at the college-level and have taken graduate courses in teaching Composition). In addition, the instructors wondered about the use of “correct” in item D: would students still have a right to their own language and dialect, to some degree? This assessment would take place toward the end of the semester, so ideally, the students would have had experience with the oral communication genres needed to achieve success in the course, but the standards seemed vague, and the instructors were not sure what exactly they should be measuring. An awareness of audience seemed missing, as well; for example, if a student presented to a “Southern” audience, certain dialect and language features would be acceptable, expected, and even welcomed, whereas a similar presentation given in another region of the country might receive a different type of reception and could impact the speaker’s ethos and credibility. The PC 2500 instructors realized that, just as it is crucial to present a credible speaking persona to their oral communication students as effective examples (Obermiller, Ruppert, & Atwood 2012), they needed to instill a similar ability in their students so that they could be credible, ethical, and believable presenters, as well.

In addition, these goals for oral communication were the same as goals given by the TBR for assessing Composition in general at TTU. While there did seem to be an awareness of purpose included in the outcomes goals, there was no discussion of audience, speaker dynamics, or use of visual aids. The absence of these crucial items was also disturbing to the
Professional Communication instructors, who focused on these elements heavily in their courses and designed their teaching strategies in a more integrative, holistic way.

As faculty teaching this course realized, despite the TBR's focus on seemingly outdated outcomes goals, they needed to and wanted to incorporate other goals that indicated the social construction of knowledge within our program, such as the growing need to address effective technology integration into the presentations, based on changing industry expectations. Addressing this social construction of knowledge in assessment processes is another element Hundleby and Allen and others (Huot) advocate (2010, p. viii-ix). Likewise, in his essay “Assessment in Action,” Anson (2010) states, “it is crucial that the outcomes [used in assessment] emerge from the discussions and negotiations of the teachers and administrators within the program” (p. 5). Clearly, the TBR mandated outcomes goals process is not ideal but can lead toward more program faculty participation.

As the director of the Professional Communication Program, I designed an evaluation form in collaboration with another faculty member (see Appendix A) that clearly identified the different learning outcomes goals that we were required to assess. However, in consultation with other Professional Communication instructors, we added other items that were important for our purposes, such as the use of visual aids, speaker dynamics, and items that addressed audience awareness. By adding these categories, the instructors consciously altered the original genre and function of the assessment form. To this date, our formal, annual assessment process has focused on the outcomes goals, although individual instructors have been tracking progress informally on the other items that have been added to the form. In the near future, the faculty hope to more formally assess these added characteristics so that we can see as a whole how our students are progressing in these areas.

Adding these categories to our assessment allows us also to account for values increasingly becoming important not only within our Professional Communication Program as a whole but also within our university’s mission as a technological university (Allen, 2010, pp. 39-56), since our focus is also on teaching students to incorporate technological media into their presentations. Addressing this area also contributes to the process of assessing multiple literacies, which Hundleby and Allen (2010) emphasize “places us well ahead of our composition colleagues in seeing the need for a thorough understanding of multiple literacies and the resulting responsibility to operate within the frameworks of their distinctive discourses” (p.
Because our assessment is so similar to Composition’s as a result of the same mandated TBR outcomes being applied, beginning to assess these multiple literacies sets our Professional Communication Program apart to those stakeholders with whom we share our assessment results, an essential part of gaining program support, both from our administration and others (Allen, 2010, pp. 52-53).

As a program administrator, I found the generic evolution of this form interesting for a variety of reasons:

1. The assessment process, while originally motivated by one purpose/goal (actually unclear from the TBR perspective) evolved into a process that the Professional Communication instructors took and claimed ownership of. As Anson (2010) says, “No higher-level program assessment, no matter how carefully structured or replete with data, can improve without the input of classroom teachers, including a coordinated, self-conscious, and collaborative implementation of pedagogical strategies” (p. 4), and the generic evolution of the assessment form provides a starting point for faculty input that can then lead to a starting point for meaningful classroom change, whether it is based on changes in teaching or learning. While the TBR outcomes focus on assessment “from the outside in” (Anson, 2010, p. 5), including assessment from the inside, as well, contributes to more authentic assessment, since individual teachers can then see how the assessment impacts everyday instruction (Anson, 2010, p. 11) and vice versa.

2. While the assessment results are available to be distributed to TBR and university administrators for whatever purposes they deem necessary, the results are also discussed collaboratively among the Professional Communication instructors, and changes can then be made to course instruction, based on our purposes (in essence, what we value as the necessary generic characteristics that should be evidenced in the presentations). 3) While still accommodating the TBR requirements, the Professional Communication faculty can continue to adapt the assessment process to meet their and students’ needs, such as conducting other, “non-required” assessments throughout the semester, using this assessment tool, to see how successfully students are learning the genres of the various types of oral presentations required in the course.
The oral presentation evaluation form/assessment tool is different from what instructors use normally when evaluating presentations; each evaluation form for each presentation is different and is tailored to each presentation’s genre (for example, an interview, non-expert presentation, mini-discussion, team presentation, etc.). When the time comes at the end of the semester to conduct the “formal” TBR assessment, the instructors evaluate students using their genre-specific forms as well as the TBR evaluation forms; in essence, a specific as well as more general evaluation are conducted for the same presentation.

This complicated process of addressing both broad institutional as well as individual program goals is informed by genre theory (Russell, 1997; Russell, 2002; Cole & Engeström, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1993; Winsor, 1999; see also Applegarth, 2012, regarding genre changes as related to social processes and the “workings of power” [p. 456]); as program director, when I designed the new, evolved form, I was consciously aware that, along with the other instructors, I was adapting this form to meet our needs as a program. This form probably will continue to evolve and change, based on students’ changing needs. Although the assessment process is relatively new (and PC 250 is only 10 years old and has been taught as part of the general education curriculum for about that long), I have already noticed changes in our students that might cause the assessment form’s focus to change.

For example, recently, I began to notice an evolving “genre of disenagement” in my students taking the course. While some students seem to “automatically” interact with the audience and present with enthusiasm (as evidenced in voice tone, body language in general, and eye contact), other students do not, and the result is a very unconvincing, less-than-sincere-appearing persona, certainly not a credible one. Possibly, this evolving genre could be a result of Tab Cooper’s (2008) theory, that as we rely more and more on technology to communicate (such as via email, texting, twittering), we lose the knowledge of effectively communicating face to face; we are no longer actually observing others’ emotional responses to ourselves and each other, and so we lose the emotional intelligence required to effectively communicate in person. Another possibility is that we as communication instructors need to pay more attention to the concept of Information Literacy: “Information literacy is not about the ability to accumulate information—there is usually too much information, not too little. Information literacy is about the ability to find the best information and use it appropriately and effectively” (Decarie, 2012, p. 167) (italics mine). In essence, students may have no problem understanding and following the assignments, even supporting their work with appropriate research, but they may not
be using it in ways that correlate with effective generic characteristics for effective presentations. Still another possibility is that now that students in general are more adept users of technology, there is not as great a need to focus on these technological skills themselves, as Cargile Cook and Zachry (2010) mention; instead, now, “our instructional and assessment focus is largely returning to excellence in . . . communication design” (p. 76), which could include effectively using/interacting with technology in oral communication in a more engaging, participatory way.

Likewise, some students may have difficulty adjusting to and applying the genres of academic presentations and those designed to help students transition to workplace contexts: “The ways in which subjects relate to discourse may be Teflon-like; therefore the language they are exposed to or use may not ‘stick’” (Alvesson & Karreman 2000, p. 1132, quoted in Allen, Walker, & Brady 2012, p. 212). Although explicit instruction in generic characteristics appropriate to various types of presentations should help students, we all have noticed that some students seem not to improve in their skills (whether in written or oral communication) during the semester.

While I am not sure other students in the class notice this lack of audience interaction from whatever cause it originates, it is very obvious to me as one who has not been immersed in communicating via technology and who has been exposed to various oral communication genres for years. In addition, the fact that most of our oral presentations require PowerPoint or some other type of visual aid technology might be contributing to the problem: students who are accustomed to allowing technology to become the primary focus while communicating in their everyday lives apply that same strategy when using a different technology when presenting. As a result of this continuing disengagement, I have identified a need for more explicit instruction in this area that could be evaluated using an adapted version of the evaluation form we are already using. While the explicit instruction would not necessarily guarantee students’ grasping the material better, it would make the information less tacit and more accessible.

In addition to these already rich dynamics involved in the evolution of this evaluation form and its dual purpose, other political dynamics played a part in the construction, evolution, and application of this form that underscore its part within our department’s complicated activity system.

The Assessment Process

The assessment process itself takes place every fall (fall of 2012 will be the third formal assessment that has taken place; a pilot assessment was conducted in fall of 2009). Before each fall semester begins, I ensure that
all instructors teaching the course are aware of the assessment process and the fact that we need to all assess a similar presentation (usually the final presentation) that allows incorporation of outside sources. Although there is some freedom among instructors regarding the presentation genres included in their courses, most follow a similar strategy of including interview presentations, presentations to non-expert audiences, a team presentation, a mini-discussion, and an impromptu presentation. Usually, because it is research based, the final presentation has been the focus of the semesterly assessment.

Around mid-term, I determine which students should be assessed, with the aid of random.org. Once the student numbers for each section are identified, I then email the numbers to the respective instructors, who then correlate those numbers to student numbers in their grade rosters. As these students give their presentations at the end of the semester, the instructors fill out the evaluation form in Appendix A (in addition to a separate form that more specifically evaluates the genre students are focusing on for this presentation and that is not included in the formal assessment process). The second form is the one the students receive and contains comments; the students do not receive the formal assessment form, and it does not contain comments. Once these forms have been completed, the instructors then transfer the results of the specific outcomes to a spreadsheet, which they then email to me. Once I receive all of the individual sections’ spreadsheets, I transfer the results to a master spreadsheet. While I am aware of individual instructors’ results while I am compiling the master spreadsheet, the final copy does not contain any identifying information. The following spring semester, all of the PC 2500 instructors meet to discuss the results of the previous semester’s assessment; so far, the results seem to indicate that we are meeting TBR’s outcomes goals, although we are still new to the formal assessment process (see Appendix B and Appendix C). Over time, we hope to see trends that indicate areas we might focus on to improve; in addition, we would like to add other categories to our spreadsheet to track the areas that we are assessing that are more specific to our students’ needs (such as the need to address the “genre of disengagement,” audience awareness, and speaker dynamics).

Connection of Assessment Practices to Teaching Practices

Because we have only two semesters’ worth of assessment data for PC 2500 and because the assessment results were very similar during those two se-
mesters, the data have not caused significant change in teaching the course so far regarding the TBR outcomes goals. So far, the governing board is not mandating that changes be made to course instruction. However, the assessment process has made an impact on other assessment processes within the department that will have a significant impact on teaching.

First, the evolution of our assessment form allows the Professional Communication faculty to assess other areas, such as the use of visual aids (an area not assessed by the TBR outcomes goals), that the faculty believe are essential to effective oral communication. Beginning fall of 2012, our fall assessment will include assessing the use of visual aids, and the results will help us determine how we might adapt our teaching strategies to instruct students on incorporating this dynamic element into their presentations.

Another way this assessment is proving to be helpful is related to two other types of assessment our department as a whole undergoes: a five-year academic audit by the TBR and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation reviews. Last year, our department underwent our first five-year academic audit (a new requirement within the TBR), and, although departmental general education courses were not the focus of the audit, I was able to discuss our assessment process briefly and ways we planned to use and expand results, such as the assessment of visual aids. Also, last year, our department produced a fifth-year interim report for SACS, and our department as a whole risked non-compliance because of a lack of “data” that were not based on student self-reporting. During a meeting with my department chair, I shared our oral presentation assessment form with her, and we both thought it could be adapted to assess writing portfolios produced by our majors in their senior year. While this form will probably evolve, too, based on its use within the department and its success, the basic format and categories used for the first assessment came from our oral communication assessment form. The assessment results based on the seniors’ writing portfolios should have a direct impact on teaching within our department in the future, since SACS requires this type of more quantifiable assessment and data.

Overall, I anticipate that the changes made to teaching, based on our assessment practices, will be beneficial because the assessment process includes input from our faculty and allows for adaptation by changing categories on the assessment form, if necessary. However, there are some subjective aspects of the form that could allow our seemingly uniform data to not be so precise, such as the possibly different interpretations of “topic was appropriate for designated audience,” “the visual aid was relevant,” “the visual aid was well designed,” “attire was appropriate,” “student created a
welcoming environment,” and even “correct diction, syntax, usage, grammar, and mechanics.” Based on our previous assessment results, it appears our faculty are fairly well calibrated in judging these areas, since the results are fairly uniform across instructors. Also, we have relatively few faculty teaching the course, and those faculty are from very similar backgrounds and interact with each other often. As we hope to add more faculty in the future, we may need to ensure that our interpretations of these subjective terms are more precise to ensure more effective assessment and teaching.

As the content of this course evolves and changes, based on changing students’ needs and also changing needs in the field of Professional Communication, especially related to the use of technology and related areas, such as visual aids, the assessment form will change to reflect those changes, as well. Part of the assessment process is discussing the results as a group, and during that time, instructors share with others what has worked well and what has not. The best practices identified during these sessions become part of the assessment process in ways that affect the evaluation form; although significant changes have not been made to the form yet, faculty input can impact the form’s generic evolution. While the TBR outcomes goals on the form will not change, seven other points exist that provide more latitude for change. These types of changes are possible mainly because the faculty have taken ownership of the form and the process, though, rather than focusing only on the TBR outcomes.

While this process is fairly standardized overall, some elements make it a bit subversive in different ways, first within our department as a whole and then regarding our specific purposes as a program

**Politics and Program Implications**

Unfortunately but predictably, our assessment process has had some negative political overtones within our department that have affected how we use our results and how others might eventually use them. These problems may relate to Rehling and Lindeman’s (2010) characterization of the complicated political context surrounding technical communication’s move to be recognized more within universities’ general education missions: “It is not easy to add to such a political circumstance an unfamiliar and probably unexpected claim on the part of technical communication [to be part of a university’s general education curriculum]. This claim is especially true due to ingrained attitudes about the role of career-oriented and professional programs within the academy” (p. 7). Since a main motivation for creating PC 2500 was to help prepare students in engineering and business at TTU, the relationship between these fields, Professional
Communication, and Speech seemed unusually complicated and created even more resentment regarding which discipline would more adequately prepare students for effective oral communication in industry settings.

Because PC 2500 had already been developed and was being offered, there didn’t seem to be a remedy to this situation for the Speech faculty. However, over the years, administrative decisions have caused the PC 2500 course offerings to be somewhat minimal (half the number of sections that used to be offered are being offered currently), and hiring has been focused on Speech instructors, not on Professional Communication (in fact, we lost one full-time, tenure-track position to Speech, leaving us with the option to hire only adjuncts to teach the course, except for two full-time Professional Communication faculty members). The Professional Communication faculty perceive that the hiring preferences stem from the fact that, in our department, Speech is still considered the “more legitimate” and longstanding option for oral communication instruction. These unfortunate politics have also influenced our assessment process, too.

When TBR began introducing the assessment process in 2008, I was on maternity leave and did not participate in the assessment orientation process (instead, the director of Speech did). Because not every general education course from a particular field (such as math or communication) needed to be assessed, according to the TBR, SPCH 2410 was chosen as the one to focus on at our university. However, Professional Communication was still invited to participate in the assessment process, and I as program director wanted to see the results and determine how they could be used to improve our Program. I collaborated with the Speech director in fall of 2009 when we conducted our first pilot of the assessment process.

After giving our data to the Speech director, I waited to hear what the final report to be sent to TBR would say and was very curious to know how our Program did, since this was the first time we had undergone the assessment, and at the time, I did not have access to the same data spreadsheets being used in Speech. As time went on, I inquired about the TBR report, and to my dismay, I learned that it had already been submitted. When I asked to see the report, I saw that none of our data had been included in the pilot study. Because our data had deliberately been excluded, and because we technically were not required now to participate in the formal assessment, I chose to withdraw from the formal process, since there was no guarantee that our results would be included and since I started to develop a paranoid suspicion that somehow, our results could be used against us.

However, I still wanted to pursue the assessment process within our Program, not only to reveal to our faculty areas we might improve upon,
but also to begin to accumulate data on how we were indeed meeting the TBR outcomes goals, in case more efforts were made to eliminate our course from the general education course offerings. In spring of 2008, our department went through a mandatory, external, five-year review, and during that time, the Speech reviewer/evaluator recommended that PC 2500 be subsumed under Speech (because I was not on campus, I did not participate in the review process except to write a portion of our self study as director of the Professional Communication Program). This recommendation was not heeded by our department. At this point, more efforts to eliminate PC 2500 have not been made, although the Speech division is in the process of forming a separate department, and once that occurs, some may question why courses from two different departments meet the same general education, oral communication requirement. For the time being, the Professional Communication faculty seek to use the assessment process to benefit its own Program, while also shoring up data that can be used in its defense if necessary.

In retrospect, I believe two major things could have been done differently during this 10-year period to help aid the introduction of PC 2500 into the general education curriculum (and impact the assessment process more positively): one relates to course content, and the other relates to hiring and student demand. First, once Professional Communication faculty taught PC 2500 for one semester, word spread through advisement and students’ word of mouth that the course better prepared students for oral communication in the workplace, based on more timely, situated assignments/contexts, as well as the emphasis on team presentations and technology. (Admittedly, another reason for the popularity of the course could be the emphasis on team presentations, especially for those with speech anxiety. However, not all PC 2500 instructors focus on team presentations to the same degree.) As a result of these positive perceptions about the course, enrollment increased sharply, while many sections of SPCH 2410 did not fill. Ideally, the Professional Communication faculty and Speech faculty would have collaborated to ensure that while disciplinary differences would necessarily remain between the two courses, the instructors teaching SPCH 2410 might make some adaptations to meet the needs of students, especially those in engineering and business. I don’t mean to imply that SPCH 2410 was not meeting the needs of its students, but some changes could be made to help equalize the interest between the two fields. In addition, faculty in the two disciplines could meet to discuss their assessment strategies and results and learn from what each group was doing. Unfortunately, in this case, such collaboration did not occur.
Second, ideally, support would occur at all administrative levels that would encourage hiring to meet the needs resulting from skyrocketing course enrollment. As mentioned previously, while hiring has not been incredibly strong within our department in general, the Professional Communication Program did lose one full-time, tenure-track instructor position to Speech, and no requests to hire additional faculty in Professional Communication have been honored, except at the adjunct level. Because our hiring qualifications are a bit more specialized than in Speech, fewer possibilities for adjuncts exist in our area, and the few full-time and adjunct faculty we have simply have not been able to fill the course need for the students wanting to take PC 2500. In the last two semesters, we have had to turn away the equivalent of three sections of students each semester, and in the cases in which we were able to add another section, it filled within one day, sometimes within just a few hours.

Here, I do not mean to imply that our administration has been hostile toward the Professional Communication Program, but several somewhat unusual circumstances have unfolded around the same time: we have a new university president who appears to be more fiscally conservative, we have a relatively new dean and associate dean at the college level, and we have an interim department chair. All of these circumstances do not point to aggressive hiring in our area or even “rocking the boat” by recommending a new hire in Professional Communication when we have not been able to fill many other lines in recent years. Also, because Speech and Journalism are in the process of forming their own department, both deans at the college level thought that adding a new hire to Speech would increase the “critical mass” of faculty in that area, thus justifying more the need for a separate department. In summary, then, areas to focus on in similar situations for program administrators would be collaboration among faculty teaching general education courses, especially within similar fields (and avoiding the lack of collaboration) and ensuring support as much as possible among different administrative levels. Specifically, more communication could be encouraged and initiated among and between the different administrative levels. Even though these recommendations are idealistic, they are goals to be aware of and work toward.

**Strategies for Difficult Assessment Contexts**

Through this difficult context, our Professional Communication faculty have identified several strategies that have proven useful in this assessment context that may be helpful to other Technical/Professional Communication program directors in other difficult political assessment contexts.
First, we determined what would be useful for our assessment purposes and what was not, based on the TBR outcomes goals. We noticed first that we were required to assess our presentation genres using the “modes” approach that we found outdated, based on our backgrounds in Composition Studies. As we reviewed these assessment criteria, we realized that several items were missing that were important to us as teachers and scholars, mainly the need to address audience awareness, speaker dynamics, and visual aids (including the use of technology). Even though we had to assess the specific outcomes goals introduced by the TBR, we considered ways they might be helpful to us (such as the goal of focusing on organization and trying to define what “diction,” “grammar,” and “syntax” might mean for our students who generally come from a narrow region of the country and tend to stay in the area upon graduating).

Second, this focus allowed the faculty to change the assessment form and use it as a tool, a cultural artifact (Lave & Wenger, 1993; Cole & Engeström, 1993) that we could use to mediate between the sometimes competing activity systems of the TBR, our university, the PC 2500 course as a whole, and our individual PC 2500 sections. While accomplishing the goals of the first two activity systems with the more traditional use of the assessment form to measure outcomes goals, we could also gather data through our added items that would provide (at the moment) more informal results that could aid us in developing a course that suited our students better. At this time, the informal assessment is providing a snapshot of students’ current needs in these important areas, and the faculty realize that these needs may change over time; as a result, we may also need to modify our assessment tool to track these changing needs. We added to the assessment outcomes so that areas our students demonstrated weaknesses in (such as use of visual aids, audience awareness, and speaker dynamics) would be present during the assessment process, not only to reveal how our students were doing in these areas but also to emphasize to ourselves, other new PC 2500 instructors, and any others reviewing our assessment data that these areas were important generic characteristics of the presentation genres we were teaching. Rather than eliminating the focus on the modes, syntax, and diction, we either added to our assessment categories or discussed among ourselves what “diction” might mean for our students and in what contexts of oral communication.

Third, we have been using the assessment results collaboratively; two full-time faculty members in Professional Communication created the evaluation form, and another formerly full-time faculty member contrib-
uted knowledge from her role assessing oral communication within the university’s College of Business to adapt areas and suggest ways we might use the data to improve what we are actually doing. In other words, the Professional Communication faculty who teach the course are actively involved in discussing the process and results, which is a sometimes-different process from how assessment might normally be conducted in university environments.

**Conclusion**

Han Yu (2010) states that “generally, we may consider a learning environment authentic when it presents students with certain tasks, contingencies, opportunities, and obstacles they may one day encounter in actual workplaces” (p. 42). The revised assessment/evaluation form is our instructors’ attempt to make this assessment process more authentic and meaningful for our particular context, not only for the students but also for the faculty; adding assessment categories we felt were problematic for our students created a modified assessment genre that targeted areas our students needed to focus on more, such as speaker dynamics and attention to audience.

In the future, our faculty hope that our assessment process can focus on meaningfulness (Crews & Wilkinson, 2010), the assessment context (Huot, 1996; Yu, 2010), and using the assessment results as teaching tools (Pathak, 2001). Meaningfulness involves ensuring that the assessment process entails more than just “going through the motions” to meet external requirements but instead determines ways our faculty can own and learn from the assessment process itself. The context for the assessment, while somewhat stable, does change, based on any changes to assignments, the student population, and the growing use of technology and presence of outside sources. And using the assessment results as teaching tools continues; the assessment process is still relatively new, but the faculty hope that soon, we can focus on more clear areas revealed by the assessment as needed areas of instruction/learning for students.

For example, as Norbert Elliot (2010) mentions in his essay “Assessing Technical Communication: A Conceptual History,” “The assessment of visual communication within a computer-mediated environment is an excellent venue for innovation. Within the construct of computer-mediated visual communication, the human interaction with language, ideas, and representation is, at once, most diverse and most unified. With its history of research into the impact of technology and the need for informed usability practices, the profession shows its strongest hand in this area” (p. 30).
Because our evaluation form includes three points about the use of visual aids that are not included at all in the TBR outcomes goals, this category would be an ideal focus for our own assessment “from the inside out” (Anson, 2010, p. 10).

Also, it’s possible that over time, additional self-assessment could occur that originally began with the mandated outcomes goals. For example, Cargile Cook and Zachry (2010) mention that “in the more or less egalitarian culture of higher education, wherever individuals place a premium on their latitude to think and act as individuals, self-assessment processes and results must be calibrated to fit the culture. Over time, these processes and results may also begin to shape the culture in which they are employed” (p. 66). While it might be somewhat idealistic to think that this evolving self-assessment process might change the culture of our department, given the somewhat tangential nature of our program in a department that focuses on literature, the Professional Communication faculty could certainly begin to change and extend the culture of assessment within the Professional Communication Program itself, even going so far as to assess our Professional Communication majors’ oral communication abilities later in their academic careers in more advanced courses. Such results could be used for our own self-assessment purposes in addition to departmental/degree audit and accreditation purposes and could help foster within our program “a shared culture of change, collaboration, and cooperation” (Cargile Cook & Zachry, 2010, p. 78). James Dubinsky (2010) mentions that this “culture of collaboration leading to change cannot be underestimated” (p. 85). Already, the assessment process as it exists now has proven to be a learning process for the faculty, as well, in a variety of contexts: personal, professional, political, instructional, and institutional, and it promises to develop into an even more significant process as our faculty continue to take individual ownership of the process while still meeting the outside TBR outcomes goals assessment process.

References


Cooper, Tab. (2008, October). Presentation given at the Association for Business Communication Conference. Lake Tahoe, Incline Village, NV.


---

**Author Information**

Kristin Pickering is a Professor of English at Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville, where she directs the Professional Communication Program. Within the Program, she teaches courses in ethics, oral communication, and technical communication genres. Her research interests include genre and activity theories,
assessment, disciplinary knowledge, and technology’s impact on tool use in communication, both spoken and written.

Appendix A

Tennessee Tech University Oral Presentation Evaluation Form (PC 2500)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Organization/Content**
Student presented a clear thesis statement at the beginning of the presentation (TBR outcome A).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The presentation contained well-organized main points related to the thesis (TBR outcome B).

| 5         | 4         | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1    |

Student developed the main points using effective rhetorical strategies (TBR outcome C).

| 5         | 4         | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1    |

Sources used were appropriate to the purpose of the presentation and were managed well (TBR outcome E).

| 5         | 4         | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1    |

Technical/audience-specific terms were explained; topic was appropriate for designated audience.

| 5         | 4         | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1    |

**Visual Aid**
The visual aid was relevant and related well to the presentation's overall purpose.

| 5         | 4         | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1    |

The visual aid was well designed and reflected design principles discussed in class.

| 5         | 4         | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1    |

The visual aid was visible, easily readable, and presented in a non-distracting manner using appropriate technological media.

| 5         | 4         | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1    |

**Presentation Quality**
Student presented using correct diction, syntax, usage, grammar,

| 5         | 4         | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1    |
Appendix B

PC Assessment Results Fall 2010

Outcome A—Students are able to distill a primary purpose into a single compelling statement.

Outcome B—Students are able to order major points in a reasonable and convincing manner, based on that purpose.

Outcome C—Students are able to develop their ideas using appropriate rhetorical patterns.

Outcome D—Students are able to employ correct diction, syntax, usage, grammar, and mechanics.

Outcome E—Students are able to manage and coordinate basic information gathered from multiple sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eleven sections were assessed, 10% of each section (three students).

Next fall, we should assess 20%; we can compare our results over time and compare with the Speech results.
Appendix C

PC Assessment Results Fall 2011

Outcome A—Students are able to distill a primary purpose into a single compelling statement.

Outcome B—Students are able to order major points in a reasonable and convincing manner, based on that purpose.

Outcome C—Students are able to develop their ideas using appropriate rhetorical patterns.

Outcome D—Students are able to employ correct diction, syntax, usage, grammar, and mechanics.

Outcome E—Students are able to manage and coordinate basic information gathered from multiple sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eight sections were assessed, about 21% of each section (six students out of approximately 28 for each section). In the case of smaller sections, more than 21% of the students were assessed.

Here are some changes we experienced since last time:

- Two additional instructors
- Four online sections
- Three fewer sections
- More “priority” students registering, such as Honors students, students with disabilities, and athletes?
- Other differences?